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Anna Kyriazi

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Framing the EU polity: how Commission presidents address crises and shape the Union

Anna Kyriazi

Department of Social and Political Sciences, Università degli Studi di Milano, Milan, Italy

ABSTRACT

The economic crisis that started in 2009 marked the beginning of a series of crises in the EU, leading not only to the politicization of crisis responses but also to that of the EU as an institutional form and a normative order. EU political elites have sought to address policy and polity challenges through public rhetorical action. This article studies the crisis communication of Commission presidents in a qualitative frame analysis of 14 speeches delivered between 2010 and 2023. It shows that while addressing crises, Commission presidents have sought to (re)claim, rationalize, and justify the exercise of authority on behalf of the EU and to reaffirm the social and moral bases on which it is built. The longitudinal time frame and the comparative approach that encompasses multiple crises provide a broad, comprehensive perspective on the framing of major EU crises.

KEYWORDS

Crisis; European Union; executive politics; speech analysis; polity

Introduction

The economic crisis that erupted in 2009 marked the beginning of a series of crises in the EU, leading not only to the politicization of policy responses but also to that of the EU as an institutional form and a normative order. Crises offer opportunities for change but also heighten risks, intensifying the contestation of EU powers (Börzel 2016; Ferrera, Kriesi, and Schelkle 2023) and fostering perceptions of the EU as a failing project due to repeated firefighting (Truchlewski, Schelkle, and Ganderson 2021).

Public rhetorical action is an indispensable element of the effort to maintain the polity in hard times by those entrusted with this task. Even if the space for debate is reduced in 'exceptional' circumstances, crisis measures still require public justification and explanation. Furthermore, political elites must also address the resulting polity challenges: to restore the EU's tattered authority, revive the solidarity on which it rests, and reaffirm the identity holding the edifice together (Ferrera, Kriesi, and Schelkle 2023). Ultimately, political entrepreneurs' discourses have a performative character: they 'contribute to producing what they apparently describe or designate' (Bourdieu 1991, 220): representations of the EU as a polity, assertions of its authority, calls for solidarity, or appeals to a shared European identity do not just describe reality but actively shape it (McNamara 2015).

CONTACT Anna Kyriazi anna.kyriazi@unimi.it Department of Social and Political Sciences, Università Degli Studi di Milano, Via Conservatorio 7, 20122, Milan, Italy

This article analyses the crisis communication of Commission presidents, who play a key role in shaping EU policies and polity. It documents their attempts to persuade fellow political elites and the public about the appropriateness of the EU's actions, and to motivate loyalty towards the system as a whole. Elites' communicative strategies matter for the 'ideational legacies they sediment' as different discursive strategies have distinct long-term impacts on the EU and its perceived purpose (Miró 2022, 308). But the study of public communication is also highly pertinent for the concept of 'crisis' itself. This is inherently mobilized for political purposes (Brubaker 2017): designating a phenomenon as a crisis serves as a call for attention, signals urgency, and asserts that exceptional times demand exceptional actions, providing a dynamic element from which polity building can potentially expand – or falter.

Unlike ordinary political discourse, crisis communication features unique dynamics (Eisele, Tolochko, and Boomgaarden 2022). Crisis framing not only addresses issues during crises but also creates their meaning, defines their boundaries, and influences their resolution. This qualitative analysis adds value to the literature by positioning public crisis rhetoric as a distinct and crucial domain of inquiry, building on but moving beyond general analyses of political communication (e.g. Bijsmans and Altides 2007; Rauh 2023). Its comparative approach further distinguishes it, encompassing multiple crises to provide a broad, comprehensive perspective on major EU challenges.

Crisis communication: a conceptual framework

Public rhetorical action, crisis politics, and the EU polity: between resilience and fragility

One – perhaps *the* – authoritative model of crisis-induced EU integration posits that failures create functional pressures, increasing incentives for cooperation among the Member States (MSs) (see, for example, Freudlsperger and Schimmelfennig 2022). The EU is even considered to have a comparative advantage in managing 'transboundary crises' due to its ability to facilitate transnational decision-making (Boin, Ekengren, and Rhinard 2013). Crises thus foster the development of supranational capacities to provide EU-wide collective goods and support MSs in tasks they struggle to accomplish. However, this prevalent model of integration through crisis often overlooks the importance of the discursive construction of crises, assuming they are self-evident material occurrences needing no further explanation. But an important element of crisis politics and policy-making is the narration of crises as being amenable to the integration project (see Alexander-Shaw, Ganderson, and Kyriazi 2023). This includes providing public justification to – often implicit – questions such as: Why does a crisis constitute a European crisis? Why is the EU involved in addressing it? Why is further integration the preferred solution? Crisis responses, therefore, comprise *interpretations* propagated by EU political elites, such as the nature of the crisis and the grounds on which responsibility is allocated to the EU to tackle it.

While many studies in the extensive EU crisis literature touch on these questions, comparative analyses across crises remain relatively rare. Nonetheless, there are valuable insights to build upon. Ferrera, Kriesi, and Schelkle (2023) argue that crises threaten the EU by exposing its vulnerabilities and escalating contestation, with public rhetorical action

playing a key role in maintaining the Union. An earlier study on the COVID pandemic (Ferrera, Miró, and Ronchi 2021) links a shift from antagonistic to solidaristic discourse among MSs to effective crisis responses, which they label 'polity maintenance' – a public commitment to preserving the EU as a political entity. Similarly, EU leaders framed Brexit as a 'common' challenge requiring unity, shaping public perceptions to mitigate systemic shock and reinforce polity resilience (Laffan and Telle 2023, 28). In contrast, Emmons and Pavone (2021) argue that a 'rhetoric of inaction' perpetuated the rule-of-law crisis (democratic backsliding in several MSs, most prominently Hungary and Poland). EU leaders paradoxically invoked EU values like mutual trust and cooperation to justify passivity. Furthermore, during the euro crisis, elites rationalized emergency measures as 'inevitable' responses to 'exceptional' necessity, stifling debate (Kreuder-Sonnen and White 2022; Scicluna and Auer 2019). This approach has been linked to growing polity fragility, as emergency rhetoric is seen to contribute to a broader 'crisis of EU governance' (Scicluna and Auer 2019, 1420) and reinforce perceptions of the EU as negating political agency (White 2019, 12).

These studies highlight the importance of communicative strategies in EU crisis politics, while also providing insights into the EU's developmental trajectory through crisis. However, since these arguments have been developed mainly based on discrete crisis cases, their scope remains unclear: are the patterns idiosyncratic, applying to the specific crisis in focus, or can general insights be drawn? And why does this matter in terms of crisis response and polity development? The present article aims to integrate this fragmented knowledge by comparing multiple crises, including the economic crisis, the refugee crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, Brexit, the rule-of-law crisis, the climate crisis, and the Russian war on Ukraine. While some crises are explicitly labelled by the speakers, others – like Brexit and the rule-of-law crisis – are not, yet they remain included in this study based on their recognition as crises in the broader scholarly literature, reflecting a deliberate choice to account for both explicit crisis framing and significant omissions (see below).

Framing problem and response

Crises emerge from threats to the core values or life-sustaining systems of a society (Boin, Ekengren, and Rhinard 2013, 6). Threat perceptions generate widespread demands for urgent responses, often undertaken under conditions of high uncertainty (ibid.). Crises are never purely objective phenomena; they inherently combine material elements, such as underlying contradictions or dysfunctions, with their political construction, representation, and performance (Brubaker 2017). Crises destabilize the normative foundations of communities (Eisele, Tolochko, and Boomgaarden 2022). In the EU context this may necessitate a reassessment and renegotiation of the prevalent agreements surrounding the EU polity – its scope, purpose, and meaning (Ibid.). The intensified impact of crisis policies on people's lives also heightens the demand for publicly justifying decisions (Ibid.). The EU's ability to (re)gain trust and support for its policies, and for the integration process writ large, depends on how its leaders communicate with the public (Pansardi and Battegazzorre 2018).

This study examines the communicative strategies of Commission presidents, who, as leaders of the EU's executive arm, aim to preserve and extend its authority. Crises typically

spotlight executive politics, positioning the Commission at the forefront (Kriesi, Ferrera, and Schelkle 2021), though national governments also mobilize and can eclipse the Commission's role (Bickerton, Hodson, and Puetter 2015). In this competitive context, Commission presidents strive to defend the EU's authority, shape crisis narratives, and persuade elites and publics to support their proposed solutions.

While one can look at crisis communication from a variety of perspectives (e.g. Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell 2009; Eisele, Tolochko, and Boomgaarden 2022), here the particular interest is the way in which Commission presidents convey specific representations of crises to maintain and build the EU polity. The analytical focus is on identifying and interpreting discursive frames that construe problems and suggest solutions. The concept of frame was originally conceived as a psycho-sociological mechanism through which people 'organize their experience' in their everyday lives (Goffman 1974). A discursive frame functions similarly to a picture frame: it draws a border around an issue, distinguishing it from its surroundings (Gamson 2004, 245). Framing selectively emphasizes certain features of a perceived reality, making some of these prominent while concealing others: speakers may strategically highlight or hide evidence, alternative solutions, or perspectives to promote a specific agenda or align with certain interests, influencing the scope of public understanding and debate. Framing not only aims to promote a particular problem definition (causal interpretation, moral evaluation) but it also implies a course of action regarding how to tackle the problem at hand (Entman 1993, 52). A second useful distinction is, then, between the identification of a problem and the proposed solutions, i.e. 'diagnostic' and 'prognostic' frames (Benford and Snow 2000) or, in different terminology, 'problem' and 'action' frames (Laffan and Telle 2023). The key insight is that crisis responses target the narrative construction of crisis, which is some distance from the contradictions or failures underlying it (Hay 1996, 255).

When framing crises, agents exercise bounded discretion, i.e. they act within institutional and structural constraints. Agency is involved in adjudicating whether a certain failure or mounting contradiction qualifies as a crisis to begin with (Alexander-Shaw, Ganderson, and Kyriazi 2023; Voltolini, Natorski, and Hay 2020). Designating an event a crisis is not a neutral act: the very notion of crisis implies an existential threat, necessitating a swift and unorthodox response. And vice versa: refusing to designate a failure a crisis is to deny that it constitutes an urgent priority. A third possibility is for some events, failures, or contradictions to be labelled crises at one point by one, or a few, powerful actor(s) but fail to gather widespread societal recognition and resonance. These instances of *partial* crisis construction are also relevant: why a certain definition is offered but fails to 'take off' begs explanation (Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell 2009).[1]

The various interpretations of crisis – *is this a crisis? a crisis of what? who/what is to blame? what should be done?* (Alexander-Shaw, Ganderson, and Kyriazi 2023) – compete in framing contests. In these contests, diverse actors strive to shape the perception of, and response to, the crisis in ways that align with their interests, values, and objectives, attempting to establish their narrative as the dominant one. In European politics, one prominent pattern concerns the mobilization of Eurosceptic populist actors, who 'thrive on crisis' (Brubaker 2017, 380). The challengers of the EU build on crises to construe and disseminate their critical interpretations of the polity, e.g. by characterizing the EU as a failing project and a source of instability. Because of the fragility of the EU 'compound' polity, a policy crisis can quickly escalate into a polity crisis, calling into question the

legitimacy and cohesion of the political order itself (Ferrera, Kriesi, and Schelkle 2023). Commission presidents are therefore expected to counter negative narratives to shape public perception, garner support for their policies, and reinforce confidence in the polity.

The EU often addresses crises by depoliticizing them. To this end, presidents may opt for performing 'non-crisis' (Brubaker 2017, 380) by downplaying the urgency or severity of certain challenges, framing them, instead, as manageable issues that reinforce, rather than threaten, the stability of the EU. However, crises tend to burst into consciousness, typically leaving limited room for such controlled minimization. Thus, Commission presidents must craft interpretations of crises that are productive for the polity, striving to make these narratives prominent. Emphasis may vary based on the substantive issue, particularly the EU's potential added value and the legitimacy it can derive from involvement. Added value refers to the unique capabilities or resources that the EU can bring to bear on a problem, which individual MSs may lack, and which Commission presidents are expected to stress. As crises often lead to bitter infighting and divisions among the MSs and institutions, presidents also aim to de-escalate conflict and fragmentation and foster solidarity by, inter alia, invoking shared European values. Some studies highlight how crisis attributes may come to bear on such responses (Cicchi et al. 2020; Ferrara and Kriesi 2022). Exogeneity (the idea that the origins of crisis are external to the EU) and symmetry (the idea that a crisis affects all or many MSs comparably) are generally thought to foster solidarity, encouraging a sense of shared responsibility and reducing the tendency to assign blame to specific actors. Such crises are more easily framed as common challenges requiring unified responses.

Commission presidents may choose to amplify and accentuate crises further. As a more critical strand of research suggests, some problems are constructed as 'crises' to bypass normal decision-making constraints, enabling leaders to reshape governance in ways that are otherwise infeasible (Kreuder-Sonnen and White 2022; Scicluna and Auer 2019; White 2019). The communication strategies of executive actors provide valuable insights into the dynamics of such 'emergency politics', including the exaggeration of crisis threats, alarmism, and the sustained perception of crises over time (Rauh 2022).

A note on the corpus and method of analysis

To evaluate communicative responses to crises, I analyse 14 speeches made by Commission presidents. Most of these (12) are State of the Union (SoEU) addresses (see Appendix). José Manuel Barroso gave the first SoEU in 2010, and successive presidents continued the tradition annually. However, no SoEU speeches were given in 2014 and 2019, both of which were election years. To maintain data continuity, I used programmatic speeches delivered by Jean-Claude Juncker and Ursula von der Leyen as candidates for Commission president in the European Parliament (EP). The final corpus includes four speeches by Barroso (2010–2013), five by Juncker (2014–2018), and five by von der Leyen (2019–2023), totalling approximately 85,000 words. The 2010–2023 time frame allows us to capture virtually the entire crisis period. During SoEU speeches Commission presidents address the plenary of the legislature, evaluating the past year, presenting a policy programme for the upcoming year, and explaining its rationale (Pansardi and Battegazzorre 2018). The SoEU speech is a widely anticipated public event, heavily reported in the mass media. These speeches generally reflect the Commission presidents'

stances and ideas, though they are carefully planned and designed, resulting in somewhat sanitized versions of crisis communication.

The analysis employs a qualitative, inductive frame analysis method, involving multiple thorough readings of the texts with the purpose of detecting clusters of discursive elements (Creed, Langstraat, and Scully 2002). The following section provides a very general quantitative overview that highlights patterns of discursive emphasis and omission in crisis framing. It identifies trends in how Commission presidents have chosen to address or downplay various crises in their speeches. Passages containing the word 'crisis' or its derivatives were marked. Additionally, segments discussing critical issues (e.g. 'Brexit', the 'rule of law', 'war', 'climate') without explicitly using the crisis label were included.[2] The texts were coded by the author using the MAXQDA software program. The subsequent sections of the analysis delve into qualitative interpretations to explore the potential factors and motivations behind these observed patterns.

Framing the EU polity through crisis

Crisis (non-)appeals

Figure 1 displays crisis salience in SoEU and programmatic speeches between 2010 and 2023, measured as the length of text segments referring to a given crisis as a proportion of the entire speech. The larger the rectangles, the more space was devoted to discussing crises in a year. Evidently, crises occupy a prominent place in the corpus, though attention levels vary over time, reflecting shifts in circumstances and priorities. The economic crisis has been the most prominent, especially during Barroso's presidency. Its salience peaked in 2011, when approximately 80% of the SoEU speech addressed this crisis in some form, and retained relevance in the following years, tapering off in the second half of the 2010s. The sole reference to the economic crisis after 2018 was made by von der Leyen in 2022, as a retrospective evaluation. While the economic crisis dominated speeches between

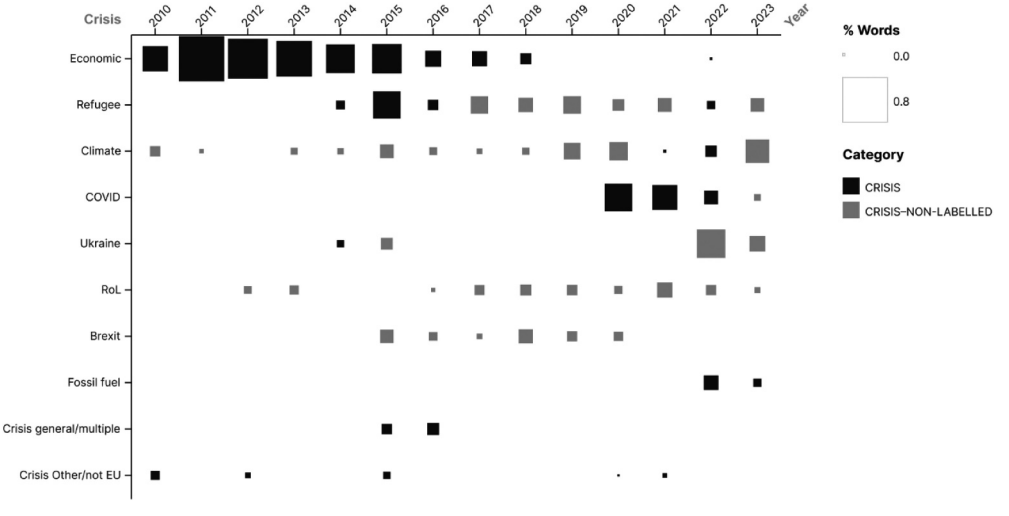

Figure 1. Crisis salience in Commission presidents' speeches.

2010 and 2015, subsequent years saw multiple crises mentioned. Juncker's 2015 speech initiated the 'polycrisis' era, constituting a peak in crisis salience overall, as 90% of his address referred to crises in one form or another. The next most salient crises in the corpus are the refugee crisis and the COVID pandemic. Overall crisis salience declined somewhat between 2017 and 2019, with 2019 being the only year in which the word 'crisis' or its derivatives are entirely absent from the presidential speech (with the caveat that this was not an SoEU speech proper). Another critical flare, driven by the 2020 pandemic outbreak and the Russian war on Ukraine, followed this period of relative calm.

Figure 1 distinguishes between crises that have been labelled as such in the speeches (most consistently the economic crisis, the refugee crisis, and the COVID pandemic) and those that have not, but that nonetheless are widely understood as crises by influential political actors, publics, and academics (marked in the figure in grey colour: rule-of-law crisis, abbreviated as 'RoL', Brexit, and the climate crisis for most of the studied period).[3] Climate change had received some attention from all Commission presidents, but in this corpus it was labelled as a crisis only in 2022. The refugee issue is intermittently branded as a crisis, though there is not an obvious pattern to the alternation. Figure 1 also suggests that Commission presidents may have intentionally scaled back explicit crisis framing over time, possibly to prevent overuse of the crisis narrative from undermining the normative order and legitimacy of the EU polity.

Brexit, which is mentioned regularly in the speeches between 2015 and 2020, is never labelled a 'crisis'. This could be coincidental (see footnote 1), though given the extremely carefully calibrated Brexit discourse of EU leaders (Laffan and Telle 2023), it likely reflects a calculated effort to downplay its significance and disruptive potential. A second notable absence is the refusal to label the rule-of-law (RoL) crisis as such. For context, the RoL crisis began with Hungary's Fidesz government in 2010, which eroded liberal democratic checks and balances, and intensified after Poland's PiS government followed suit in 2015 (Holesch and Kyriazi 2022). Combined with occasional breaches across other MSs, this enduring challenge threatens the EU's legal order and poses an existential risk to its integrity (Kelemen 2019, 247). Barroso made a reference to the RoL crisis back in 2012 in which he spoke about 'threats to the legal and democratic fabric in some of our European states'. Commission presidents have continued to mention the issue with some consistency since 2016 – but never designated it a crisis,[4] perhaps to downplay the threat posed by it, and to divert attention from the EU's failure to offer a robust solution.

Conversely, Commission presidents labelled as crises phenomena that have not been widely declared as such at the level of the broader public or academic debate. Most of these references come from Juncker's 2015 and 2016 speeches. In his 2015 SoEU address, Juncker thematized extensively intersecting crises, as well as referring more generally to the crisis period (coded as 'general/multiple' in Figure 1). In 2016, Juncker evoked an 'existential crisis' facing the EU, lamenting the failure to 'cooperate in a spirit of solidarity', prioritizing 'exclusively national interests' and the pursuit of 'the easy path of fragmentation' 'where the demanding effort of union is needed'. In the same speech, Juncker also spoke of an ongoing 'humanitarian crisis' in the EU, meaning 'unacceptably' high levels of youth unemployment and stunted intergenerational social mobility.[5] This could have been a nod to southern Europe, particularly Greece (without, however, naming the country), where the ascending radical left party, Syriza, framed the adverse domestic impacts of the economic crisis and the

repercussions of the austerity measures taken to tackle it in terms of a humanitarian catastrophe.[6] Finally, in her 2022 and 2023 speeches, von der Leyen spoke about a 'fossil fuel crisis', triggered by the Russian war on Ukraine. By labelling it a 'crisis', she underscored the urgent need for Europe to rethink its energy strategy, while also highlighting how Russian aggression posed a direct threat to the EU and its citizens (thereby seeking to further boost support for the EU's Ukraine policy). Overall, then, these idiosyncratic crises constitute variants of more consensually accepted crises, with a particular emphasis on their social and political repercussions, which the speakers seek to frame as urgent and pressing. We now turn to discussing the seven most salient crises in this corpus in more detail.

The EU's really bad crises: the economy and refugees

The economic crisis initiated the EU's long crisis period. It was characterized by unprecedented levels of uncertainty, the threat of disintegration, and deep rifts among the MSs, divided between 'debtors' and 'creditors', 'saints' and 'sinners' (Matthijs and McNamara 2015). Commission presidents framed the crisis as an intense and multifaceted challenge encompassing an economic, political, and social dimension: 'The economic and financial crisis has put our Union before one of its greatest challenge ever. Our interdependence was highlighted and our solidarity was tested like never before' (Barroso 2010). The origins are also represented as multifactorial, ranging from irresponsible practices in the financial sector and forces of globalization that lie outside EU control, but also meting out a large chunk of responsibility to MSs:

> This crisis is financial, economic and social. But it is also a crisis of confidence. . . Some of our Member States have lived beyond their means. Some behaviours in the financial markets have been irresponsible and inadmissible. We have allowed imbalances between our Member States to grow, particularly in the euro area. (Barroso 2011)

While the speeches emphasize the need for solidarity among the MSs, the basis for such solidarity is less a moral imperative to help the needy and more self-interest, dictated by the inextricable interdependence of MSs: 'We either swim together, or sink separately. We will only succeed if, whether acting nationally, regionally or locally we think European' (Barroso 2010). Another indication of a narrowly construed concept of solidarity is the unusual singling out of Greece in speeches, a notable departure from the norm, as Commission presidents rarely mention individual MSs, especially in a negative context: 'Let me start with Greece. Greece is, and will remain, a member of the euro area. Greece must implement its commitments in full and on time' (Barroso 2011). The text essentially advocates Greece's continued membership in the EMU, and therefore maintaining the integrity of the polity, but only under strict and predefined conditions. The language of sheer necessity and the remarkable lack of a principled justification given for proposed solutions other than the emergency itself are notable characteristics of speeches from this period: 'I have spoken about the economic measures that we must implement as a matter of urgency. This is indispensable. But it is not sufficient. We must go further. We must complete the economic and monetary union' (Barroso 2012).

That said, the economic crisis was quite exceptional in this respect, with the emergency script fitting the EU's other crises much less.[7] Furthermore, even in the case of the

economic crisis, appeals to a rather self-interested solidarity model and generally coercive argumentation coexist with attempts to prop up the EU polity as a positive project. Both Barroso and Juncker promote the idea that, ultimately, the EU is more than just a market; that it represents a broader European ideal rooted in European values. They also express increasing concern about the socially disruptive impact of economic adjustment programmes. Juncker especially pivots towards a more socially sensitive approach, acknowledging the pain caused by the crisis (though less so the implication that policies supported by the EU may have deepened rather than alleviated this pain). In his statement as a candidate, Juncker also placed relatively more emphasis on the need for legitimacy, e.g. by acknowledging that the Troika lacked 'democratic substance' (Juncker 2014).

The refugee crisis followed right on the heels of the economic one and is the second most salient crisis overall in the corpus. Juncker mentioned it as a candidate back in 2014, but attention really peaked in 2015 with the arrival of unusually large numbers of asylum seekers from war-torn Syria and other regions at the EU's borders. Since then, it has remained on the Commission's radar, gaining further impetus in 2022 due to another wave of humanitarian migration, this time from Ukraine. The speeches advance two definitions of the refugee crisis. One is a conventional interpretation, viewing the crisis as a period of increased numbers of asylum seekers reaching the EU; the other frames it as a crisis of lacking intra-EU solidarity. This dual perspective is already evident in Juncker's 2014 speech, which more generally encapsulates key themes of the Commission's approach:

> Legal immigration and illegal immigration concern our fellow citizens on an almost daily basis. We need a common asylum policy, and I will put one forward. We need to think about the legal immigration that Europe will sorely need over the next five years. Let us do just as well as the United States, Canada and Australia. [. . .] Let us protect our external borders. Let us protect our external borders. Let us combat the criminal groups who make money off of other people's misery. Let us help would-be immigrants in their own countries, before they get on a boat to cross the Mediterranean. And let us establish better solidarity between Northern and Southern Europe. Illegal immigration and the refugee crisis are not the problems of Malta, Cyprus, Italy or Greece, they are the problems of Europe as a whole.

The text presents the humanitarian crisis through a security lens, suggesting that a neat distinction between 'legal' and 'illegal' immigration is necessary and possible, and focuses on border protection and the persecution of criminals as the preferred solution. Subsequent speeches depart precious little from this logic, though as the crisis deepens and drags on, the tone of presidents becomes more urgent as they plead with member state governments to consider not only the humanitarian implications of restrictive policies but also the rifts created within the polity. Tropes evoking European history, identity, and values are mobilized to create a sense of moral responsibility:

> We Europeans should remember well that Europe is a continent where nearly everyone has at one time been a refugee. Our common history is marked by millions of Europeans fleeing from religious or political persecution, from war, dictatorship, or oppression. (Juncker 2015)

Von der Leyen's speeches reflect an increasing exasperation with the lack of solidarity between the MSs ('Migration is an issue that has been discussed long enough,' she said in

2020). While maintaining an emphasis on security concerns, von der Leyen also highlights the openness shown toward Ukrainian refugees, arguing that this should serve as a blueprint for future migration policies. The persistent concealment of deficiencies of the EU asylum policy suggests a lack of acknowledgement of the shortcomings in the EU's system. The high-intensity intergovernmental conflict triggered by the crisis is suppressed, with frontline states and other positive examples (Romania, Bulgaria) singled out as deserving solidarity and praise.

Containing 'polity attacks' from within: Brexit and the rule of law

While most other crises stem from failures of EU policies, Brexit and the RoL crisis constitute deliberate attacks against the EU's core values (Schimmelfennig 2024), bringing into question the desirability and meaning of membership in a compound polity of nation states. The UK's 2016 leave vote was a systemic shock, threatening the EU's very existence (Schelkle et al. 2024). EU political elites reacted by framing Brexit as a common crisis requiring a united response (Laffan and Telle 2023). SoEU speeches align with, and have helped shape, this strategy. The theme of British membership first emerged in 2015, when Juncker referred to ongoing negotiations for a 'new settlement' between the UK and the EU. At the time, he conceded that 'the EU must adapt and change in view of the major challenges and crisis we are facing at the moment', but nonetheless the emphasis was on protecting the 'integrity of all four freedoms of the Single Market' (Juncker 2015). Post-referendum, the priority became managing the fallout and curtailing speculation about disintegration:

> [. . .] we respect and, at the same time, regret Britain's decision. However, the continued existence of the European Union is not under threat. We would appreciate the British making their move to leave as soon as possible so as to put an end to the steadily growing uncertainties and so that we can restructure our relationship with the United Kingdom, which must remain friendly. Part of this restructured relationship will involve allowing free access to the internal market only to those committed to the free movement of people and workers. There will be no internal market à la carte. (Juncker 2016)

Subsequent speeches emphasize that the UK will become a third country, that the EU's competent negotiation team will confer a fair and orderly withdrawal, safeguarding EU citizens' rights and common interests, while glossing over the EU's failure to keep the UK in the EU after the new settlement as well as the significant challenges posed to the EU by Brexit (see also Laffan and Telle 2023). If Brexit led to a broader reckoning about the flaws of EU integration, this was not expressed in SoEU speeches. The need for reform was mentioned only pre-referendum, not afterwards; in any case, the shape of such reform and the fact that it would be bound to be contentious are likewise obscured. The emphasis on unity conceals the risks of disunity during the negotiations as well as the asymmetric impact of Brexit on MSs, though solidarity with the most affected among them, Ireland, is a key theme. Overall, not only is Brexit never labelled a crisis but also Commission presidents do not spend more time on it than strictly necessary – it is the least salient of all the EU's major crises (Figure 1).

The rule-of-law issue is mentioned in 10 out of the 14 speeches (Figure 1). However, despite putting it on the radar, successive Commission presidents have struggled to

address it convincingly or even coherently. Barroso's 2012 speech marked the beginning of the Commission's characteristic response to the crisis: prioritizing the creation of new instruments over utilizing existing ones (Kelemen 2023). Presidents repeatedly emphasize – often in somewhat platitudinous terms – that freedom, equality, and the rule of law form the core of the EU's identity: 'The rule of law is not optional in the European Union. It is a must. Our Union is not a State but it must be a community of law' (Juncker 2017) and:

> The cradle of our European civilisation is Greek philosophy and Roman Law. And our European continent went through its darkest period when we were ruled by dictators and Rule of Law was banished. For centuries, Europeans fought so hard for their liberty and independence. (Von der Leyen 2019)

But the seemingly uncompromising commitment to upholding the rule of law is accompanied by constant mitigating efforts, with presidents invoking variably the 'principle of equality between the member states' (Barroso 2013), that 'we must do more to revive the lost art of compromise' (Juncker 2018), or praising 'dialogue between Member States' on the issue (von der Leyen 2023). Nonetheless, von der Leyen continues to assert the Commission's authority in addressing the problem on behalf of the EU: 'The Commission will always be an independent guardian of the Treaties. Lady Justice is blind – she will defend the Rule of Law wherever it is attacked' (von der Leyen 2019). Despite this commitment, as has already been mentioned, the RoL problem is never labelled a crisis in SoEU speeches. Another omission is just as remarkable: even though the RoL crisis is clearly understood as being driven principally by two actors, Fidesz-led Hungary and PiS-led Poland, these countries are never named. Only Malta and Slovakia are cited as problematic examples, the former due to controversial justice reforms and the latter because of corruption inquiries in Von der Leyen's 2021 speech. Even after the Commission finally decided to cut off Hungary and Poland from receiving (some) EU funds in 2022, this was not mentioned in the SoEU speeches.

Confronting global challenges: the climate crisis, COVID, and Ukraine

Successive Commission presidents addressed climate change in nearly every speech analysed (Figure 1). They tackled it with detailed technical and policy solutions, generally adopting a utilitarian approach, rarely leveraging symbolic resources for polity building, except for two noteworthy elements. First, the speeches seek to construct the EU's identity as a global leader and normative power for positive change: 'At a time when major events await us, from Durban to Rio + 20, Europe must retain its position of leadership on these questions' (Barroso 2011) and: 'I want Europe to be the leader when it comes to the fight against climate change' (Juncker 2017). Prior to 2019, speeches usually mention international negotiations, such as the Copenhagen COP (where according to Barroso's 2010 speech 'we did not help ourselves by not speaking with one voice'), and the landmark Paris agreement. With von der Leyen's candidacy and subsequent presidency the issue took centre stage, as she proposed and implemented the European Green Deal (EGD). The theme of global leadership also remains central in her speeches, but the rhetoric is more urgent, e.g. by describing the climate crisis as 'the gravest planetary crisis of all time' (von der Leyen 2021) and highlighting its severe impacts, including economic disruptions. While the texts acknowledge the challenges

posed by the transition to a green economy necessary to mitigate the catastrophic impacts of climate change, they generally foreground the opportunities: technological advancements, economic growth, and improved competitiveness.

The second community-building element in the framing of the climate crisis is its stated aim to balance ambitious environmental goals with social equity, ensuring that all members of the society can participate in, and benefit from, the net-zero transition:

> But what is good for our planet must also be good for our people and our regions. [. . .] We need a just transition for all. Not all of our regions have the same starting point – but we all share the same destination. This is why I will propose a Just Transition Fund to support those most affected. This is the European way: we are ambitious. We leave nobody behind.

The text constructs the EU as a solidarity-based and inclusive polity, where the burdens and benefits of policies are shared fairly, where goals are common, and the vision for the future unified. The framing minimizes the uneven impacts across MSs and sidesteps potential trade-offs between environmental goals and economic growth, and global competition.

The COVID-19 pandemic emerged in early 2020 and was the main critical theme in von der Leyen's 2020 and 2021 speeches (Figure 1). It was also mentioned in 2022 and 2023, albeit briefly, as a reflection on the alleged success of the EU's response. The pandemic was framed as a crisis caused by a virus straining health systems across the EU: 'A virus a thousand times smaller than a grain of sand exposed how delicate life can be. It laid bare the strains on our health systems and the limits of a model that values wealth above wellbeing' (von der Leyen 2020) – a somewhat surprising formulation given that wealth creation is always a central theme in SoEU speeches. The stated priority was to contain the virus through coordinated action, including a proposal to extend the EU's competences and establish a health union for better future crisis management. The EU's recovery from the pandemic was also positioned as a chance to address climate change impacts, intertwining the two crises and their resolutions.

Similarly to the climate crisis, von der Leyen aimed to assert the EU's global leadership in addressing worldwide health challenges:

> In the face of the crisis, some around the world choose to retreat into isolation. Others actively destabilise the system. Europe chooses to reach out. Our leadership is not about self-serving propaganda. It is not about Europe First. It is about being the first to seriously answer the call when it matters.

Finally, the Ukraine crisis consisted of two clearly distinguishable episodes (Figure 1). In early 2014, Russia invaded and subsequently annexed Crimea, a momentous event that received comparatively little attention in the speeches. In his 2014 statement, Juncker mainly focused on the need of the EU to reduce energy dependency, vaguely acknowledging that 'Ukraine is a European nation' and that 'its place is in Europe'. In 2015, he spent slightly more time on the topic, calling for 'more Europe and more Union in our foreign policy'. In a jarring segment, Juncker nostalgically cited his long-standing relationship with Putin on the occasion of a meeting with him: 'We recalled how long we have known each other, how different times had become', still then arguing for the need to 'engage' with Russia. The segment illustrates the EU's failure – never admitted in the speeches – to contain the Kremlin's growing aggression, despite the 2014 annexation,

two gas crises in previous years, the Russian regime's subsequent invasion of Georgia, and its involvement in Syria.

Von der Leyen devoted a large chunk of her 2022 address to the war that commenced in early 2022 with Russia's attack of Ukraine, giving less but still considerable attention to it again in 2023. Taken together with the 'fossil fuel crisis' and the Ukrainian refugee crisis (coded separately), her emphasis on the war was significant (Figure 1). Russia's invasion is framed in unambiguous terms as a significant threat to European democracy, security, and prosperity, triggered by the aggression of an authoritarian regime:

> Let us be very clear: much is at stake here. Not just for Ukraine – but for all of Europe and the world at large. And we will be tested. Tested by those who want to exploit any kind of divisions between us. This is not only a war unleashed by Russia against Ukraine. This is a war on our energy, a war on our economy, a war on our values and a war on our future. This is about autocracy against democracy. And I stand here with the conviction that with courage and solidarity, Putin will fail and Europe will prevail. (Von der Leyen 2022)

The speech juxtaposes polar opposites (autocracy against democracy, Putin versus Europe, fail versus prevail), asserts the unity of the MSs and the danger of divisions, and reassures that this is a union that learns from the past, both in terms of ever-quicker crisis responses and acknowledging its earlier errors. In a nod to eastern Europe, von der Leyen admitted that 'We should have listened to the voices inside our Union – in Poland, in the Baltics, and all across Central and Eastern Europe'. In her 2022 speech, the president outlined a three-pronged programme: support Ukraine to ensure its survival, reopen enlargement to stabilize the region, and protect Europeans from the economic consequences of the war, the latter in particular receiving considerable emphasis.

Comparative insights

Framing problem and response across different crises

Table 1 condenses how Commission presidents have framed the EU's major crises, distinguishing on the one hand between problem definitions and courses of action proposed, and on the other hand between elements that are foregrounded or obscured by such framing. As is hardly surprising, EU presidents identify the EU's actions as necessary, justified, and successful while concealing any complications or major trade-offs. Beyond this, however, there is a notable tendency on the part of Commission presidents to present crises as primarily exogenous in origin and symmetric in terms of impact.

First, speeches tend to obscure internal systemic weaknesses and the role of EU-led policies that may have contributed to the crises. Commission presidents locate the source of the problem or dysfunction primarily in external causes. A characteristic example of the tendency to (at least partly) 'exogenize accountability' (Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell 2009) is the refugee crisis. Although the speeches acknowledge that the lack of a coordinated response and solidarity among EU MSs contributed to the severity of the crisis, its origin nonetheless lies firmly in political instability, armed conflict, and humanitarian crises in regions outside the EU. The EU's avoidable policy failures that have also contributed to the crisis and the institutional constraints and contradictions that have hampered the resolution of the crisis (Lavenex 2018) remain unstated. Likewise, the economic crisis is blamed

Table 1. Comparative analysis of crisis framing by the European Commission presidents: highlighted and concealed elements across major EU Crises.

	Problem Frame		Action Frame	
	Highlighted	Concealed	Highlighted	Concealed
Economic	- An intense and multifaceted challenge: economic, political, social - Multifactorial origins: financial sector, MSs, globalization - Interdependence of MSs	- Role of (also) EU-led deregulation - Negative feedback of crisis policies	- Structural reforms, modernizing of economies - Promote social fairness - Maintain stability and integrity of the euro zone - More unity, integration, and democracy in the EU	- Crisis solutions exacerbated the problem even further - Disregard of MSs' sovereignty and democratic legitimacy - Delayed and fragmented response
Refugee	- Wars in nearby regions led to a surge of refugees reaching the EU's borders - A European crisis affecting all MSs	- Structural failures of EU asylum policy	- Establish a framework for legal and orderly migration, incl. common protection standards in line with EU core values - Show solidarity with frontline states	- EU continues to adopt protectionist policies - Very intense intergovernmental conflict re policy solutions - Rise of xenophobia contrasting stated values
Brexit	- UK citizens chose Brexit - Uncertainty poses a threat - EU unity/survival is guaranteed	- Failure to keep UK in the EU - Asymmetric impact on MSs	- EU will negotiate fair and orderly withdrawal without breaking unity - UK will become friendly third country EU could be improved (a little)	- Risk of disunity during the negotiations - Contentious EU-UK negotiations - Any EU reform will be limited and/or contested
Rule of law	- Challenge to EU's fundamental values	- Fundamental values can be claimed by backsliders - Full-blown membership crisis driven by Hungary and Poland	- Development of new more effective instruments - Consolidation of Commission's role as an impartial referee	- EU leadership reluctant to use existing/new instruments - EU actions attacked by backsliders as "politically motivated"
Climate	- Climate change poses an existential threat to humanity - EU will lead the global fight against the problem	- Different member state capacities, resources, interests to deal with (or even recognize) the crisis	- Ensure a sustainable and prosperous future for Europeans - Distribute costs in a socially just way - EU shall become a global climate leader	- Intergovernmental and ideological conflict over climate change policy - Other global players are not compelled to follow/accept EU leadership
COVID	- A pandemic exposing fragility and strains of health systems - An economic and social crisis	- EU policies that had contributed to weakened health systems - Sovereigntist reflex	- Containment of the virus through coordinated action - EU global leadership	- Lack of appetite to extend EU's limited competences in health
Ukraine	- Illegal war waged by Russia against Ukraine - Rising authoritarianism threatening European democracy, security, and prosperity	- Failure to contain the Kremlin's aggression since 2000s - EU geopolitical dependence on US and NATO revealed and increased	- Support Ukraine to survive - Reopen EU enlargement - Decrease energy dependence on Russia - Cushion economic consequences	- Dissensus on major policies (e.g. sanctions and enlargement) - Energy independence conflicts with other goals (green transition); has uneven impacts

on the behaviour of irresponsible actors, such as financial markets and certain MSs 'living beyond their means' (Barroso 2011), but over time even this seems to have been forgotten, as this quote from Juncker's 2018 speech demonstrates: 'Ten years after Lehman Brothers, Europe has largely turned the page on an economic and financial crisis which came *from outside* but which cut deep at home' (emphasis added). Similarly, it is the specificities of British politics and society that explain Brexit, and any weaknesses in European politics that Brexit highlighted are obscured (Laffan and Telle 2023). This is also the case with the pandemic, which von der Leyen casts as an entirely exogenous global event, barely mentioning the MSs' recourse to nationalized modes of governance that aggravated the COVID-19 crisis in its early stage (unilateral closure of borders, hoarding of equipment).

Second, Commission presidents often present crises as common. Although in reality these concern some states more than others, crises are portrayed as challenges that affect the entire community and therefore require collective action. Brexit, for instance, was framed as a shared crisis even though its impact was quite asymmetrical with huge repercussions for Ireland, but also for the UK's trading partners and traditional allies. Similarly, speakers have consistently placed the refugee crisis in a broader European context, claiming time and again that it was not merely a problem of individual (frontline) states but a challenge impacting the entire polity. Part of this 'communalization' strategy is that presidents generally refrain from criticizing specific states, except for the economic crisis, when Greece's 'troubles' were singled out both by Barroso and Juncker (albeit Juncker turned more praiseful in 2018, 'applaud[ing] the people of Greece for their Herculean efforts'). Even in the case of the RoL crisis, primarily driven by Hungary and Poland, Commission presidents avoided naming these countries, instead highlighting less severe cases like Slovakia and Malta in an apparent effort to portray the issue as more widespread and symmetrical, rather than confined to a few outliers. Finally, EU unity is also conveyed through the emphasis on global leadership. This underscores the Union's collective responsibility and its role as a key player on the world stage, purportedly uniting its members under common goals and actions. Generally, the speeches do not broadcast diverging interests, disagreements, and policy conflicts. They do, however, warn of the threats of disunity and diagnose potential or real policy failure and polity politicization as a result of internal discord.

The point evidenced here is that crisis attributes that are used as explanatory factors of crisis responses are at least in part mutable through political rhetoric: polity maintenance as a communicative strategy entails the discursive *exogenization* of crisis origin and *communalization* of impact in a way that can be quite independent of material crisis pressures.

Attributing agency and responsibility to the EU

The analysis suggests that the substantive issue at the heart of a crisis does not fundamentally alter the overarching approach to framing employed by Commission presidents. While some variations arise from the unique challenges and opportunities inherent in each type of crisis, ultimately, the framing strategies remain consistent in their core objectives: to underscore the necessity of EU action, emphasize solidarity and collective resilience, and reinforce the EU's authority and legitimacy as a polity.

Commission presidents frame crises as opportunities to bolster the EU polity, emphasizing shared values and collective resilience to counter vertical and horizontal divisions. These narratives are performative, shaping the reality they claim to describe (Bourdieu 1991; McNamara 2015). Three polity-constitutive features are especially relevant from our point of view: the polity's and its people's identity, solidarity among its constituents, and its capacity to take authoritative decisions (Ferrera, Kriesi, and Schelkle 2023).

First, all polities rely on integrating collective identities, and identity heuristics may become more salient in disorienting emergencies (Kyriazi, Pellegata, and Ronchi 2023). Commission presidents' speeches often make claims on behalf of 'Europeans' asserting essential commonality (frequently appeals to shared 'history' and 'values'), offering a version of 'Europeanness' as a positive force for the resolution of a crisis. The speeches also project the EU's 'identity' outward, into the international realm. In particular, Brexit, the COVID pandemic, and the Ukraine war were used to demonstrate the improved global standing that the EU supposedly guarantees to its members, but also to construct the EU's international image or 'actorness' in the first place.

Second, Commission presidents also strive to revive solidarity among the polity's constituents – that is, mobilize loyalty towards the system (Ferrera, Kriesi, and Schelkle 2023). All speeches extensively thematize solidarity, albeit in different forms: by highlighting instances of successful cooperation and unity among the MSs, or examples of courageous acts and duty displayed by individuals (typically in the pandemic or the war).

Third, crises are narrated in a way that attributes agency and allocates authority to the EU to tackle them. This is the expansive element of crisis communication, which is the springboard for integration. Generally, whenever crises are mentioned, this is accompanied by the defence of the EU's authority and attempts to extend it. Commission presidents rarely explicitly articulate *why* the EU should have authority in any given matter, taking for granted that each crisis should be solved by the EU, with further integrative steps, and that scaling back authority is not an option (see Scicluna and Auer 2019). Explicit reflections on the EU's (or the Commission's) mandate to tackle the crises in the first place, and expand its competences while doing so, were offered with extreme rarity. By making the EU's role seem natural and unremarkable, speakers imply that it cannot be questioned.

But while presidents seek to leverage crises for reform, they do not exaggerate them either. Crises do not persist longer in Commission presidents' discourses than they do in public consciousness. Moreover, while the economic crisis fits the emergency politics script best, patterns of crisis 'exploitation' (Kreuder-Sonnen and White 2022; Scicluna and Auer 2019) were not prominent across the board and were not evident in relation to Brexit, the rule-of-law crisis, or the war on Ukraine. If anything, Commission presidents seem to resist politicizing systemic failures or contradictions *as crises* until they are forced to confront them. The climate crisis is a unique case where von der Leyen wilfully elevated a partly politicized crisis onto the agenda, but even this came as a response to massive protest movements demanding urgent action explicitly from the EU in the lead-up to a new electoral cycle in 2018–2019 (Kyriazi and Miró 2023). It is notable that in climate policy, the EU boasts high competences, and its added value is widely acknowledged. This demonstrates that the Commission has some leeway in politicizing certain events as crises, with successive presidents trying to pre-empt political pressure and, to some extent, shape it.

Conclusion

The gradual upscaling of authority to a global scale as a response to pressing societal challenges that span national borders is a contested process (Rauh and Zürn 2020) requiring symbolic political work even in 'normal' times (McNamara 2015). Crises acutely expose and draw attention to the fragility of the EU's authority and the loyalty that sustains it. They can serve as critical junctures for polity development by increasing the politicization of the EU, while also offering opportunities for its expansion. This article draws attention to the fact that this is *also* a discursive process: crises are not purely factually given occurrences, but rather they are subject to construction and interpretation by political agents. Commission presidents disseminate their versions and visions of an EU polity in crisis, suggest diagnoses, and promote solutions to failures or contradictions.

While there are differences between the three speakers included in this study, the general pattern that emerges from the Commission presidency as an institution is the strategic use of rhetoric to unify MSs while downplaying internal weaknesses and conflicts. It must be recognized that these are *attempts*, and as such, they may or may not succeed in persuading or in eliciting compliance. Moreover, while the Commission is a significant actor in crisis framing contests, it is not alone: member state governments, other EU institutions, political parties, and civil society also participate in such contests, deploying discourses that may align with or challenge those of the Commission.

Notes

1. The use of a particular label at any one instance can be a stylistic choice, such as using a synonym to avoid repetition, and depends on the availability of lexical alternatives. For example, instead of referring to the COVID crisis, one might invoke the COVID 'pandemic'; instead of the crisis in Ukraine, the 'war'; and Brexit has its own distinctive and recognizable label. However, persistent resistance to labelling a certain phenomenon as a crisis should generally be seen as intentional over and above idiosyncrasies.
2. Identifying relevant sections was straightforward in most cases, as new topics were often introduced by separators (e.g. 'Honourable members') or new headings in transcribed versions of the speeches. However, distinguishing between crisis and non-crisis topics was not always clear-cut, especially as speakers often sought to ensure a smooth flow between subjects. Nevertheless, in most cases, transitions between crisis and non-crisis topics are evident to the average listener or reader.
3. When the same phenomenon is referred to in the same speech both as a crisis and with a different label, it is coded as 'crisis labelled' (black rectangles in Figure 1).
4. There have been some notable deviations from this, such as when, in 2013, Commission Vice-President Viviane Reding spoke about 'the Hungarian crisis that started at the end of 2011' (Reding 2013).
5. Figure 1 subsumes the 'humanitarian crisis' under the economic one.
6. The academic literature has not analysed this phenomenon, but journalistic accounts are available; see, for example, Kostoulas (2015).
7. In line with Rauh (2022), who arrives at a similar conclusion based on quantitative text analysis of a large corpus.

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ORCID

Anna Kyriazi http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8877-8658

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Appendix. Speeches included in the analysis

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